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STATE REPRESENTATIVE
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Rep. Pope Column: Parent or Employee?

United States, Wisconsin pit social and economic roles against each other through regressive Family Leave policies.

This article features a modified version of a column first published on August 27, 2015.

Let's compare two countries.

In Country 1, motherhood and career are given equal importance. A mother is given the time necessary to heal and be cleared by medical professionals before leaving the hospital with her newborn child. After her stay in the hospital, she is allowed 140 days of full pay to take care of her child, take care of herself, and get her affairs in order before returning to the job.

In Country 2, the state of affairs is quite different. Mothers are allowed limited stays in hospitals, most often less than 48 hours after the child is born, to recuperate. She is given up to 12 weeks (84 days) off from work at most, with no pay. Not only must she map out a strategy to make ends meet during her time off, but she must raise a child as quickly as possible in order to keep her job and steady income. In this country, 1 in 4 mothers will return to work within 2 weeks of childbirth.

One thing is clear: the first country's approach is much more advanced and considerate of the difficult role of motherhood and parentage in general. It may surprise you that "Country 1" is Estonia, a small European republic bordering Russia, with an estimated population of 1.3 million. "Country 2," is the United States – which heralds itself for being the "land of opportunity."

For millions of parents every year, this door to opportunity is slammed shut by the United States' regressive policies towards paid family leave.

This week, a coalition of Democratic legislators came together to advocate for change in Wisconsin's family leave policies. Myself, along with Senator Janis Ringhand and a number of other legislators stood strongly behind a better leave policy for illness in individuals and their loved ones, including a better maternity leave policy.



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In the United States, federal law mandates that parents will be allowed 12 weeks off, unpaid, to raise their children. Some outside observers may view this time as a vacation, making pay unnecessary. But as anyone who has raised a newborn would know, it's hard work.

This law comes with a number of loopholes – including the restriction that the mother must have worked for their employer for a minimum of 1 year, and must work for a company with more than 50 employees.

In some instances, these loopholes create a medically and financially unsafe situation for expectant mothers. In one example, a mother planned her pregnancy strategically so that she would give birth after 12 months of employment. She also signed up for a disability insurance plan, which can sometimes offset child-rearing costs. Unfortunately, her carefully thought-out plan fell through when her son was born 4 months premature. She could not access 12 weeks of leave, did not qualify for her insurance plan, and had to get back to work in just a couple weeks with a premature baby at home.

By international standards, the United States' family leave policy falls far behind almost all nations. In fact, 178 countries around the world offer some sort of paid family leave for citizens – with some offering half-pay or a percentage of pay, but nonetheless allowing a parent some job security. The United States is among a handful of countries who provide no financial support for parents, including Papau New Guinea, Swaziland, Liberia, and Lesotho.

The United States, as the leader of the free world, should not be a member of this list.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 48 U.S. states received a failing grade in providing parents adequate support when starting a family. The most common argument against setting up a comprehensive family leave plan rests on the idea that it will create an economic drain. Three states have implemented paid family leave – California, Rhode Island and New Jersey. In California and New Jersey (the only two with considerable data on the subject), employers found that the implementation of paid family leave had no impact on business. It had no effect on productivity, profitability, or turnover. In fact, in the most recent ranking, California's job growth came in at 9th to Wisconsin's 30th.

The benefits of improved family leave laws would be significant, not only for working families but for our population as a whole. Countries with comprehensive family leave laws experience lower rates of infant mortality, improved maternal health, and improved cognitive, social and motor skills in children.



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With few negative impacts and a number of positives, it seems obvious that Wisconsin can and should join the states who are moving forward in providing commonsense rights to working families. We need to improve our family leave system and progress into the 21st century as a state and nation.

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